EDITORIAL

Unpacking strategic alliances in European higher education

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The rise of strategic alliances

As the world becomes more complex and interconnected, organizations embedded in dynamic, competitive, and highly institutionalized fields devise mechanisms to reduce uncertainty and enhance competitiveness by joining forces with other players, thereby increasing both their salience, legitimacy and resilience. One such mechanism pertains to strategic alliances (SAs), broadly defined as inter-organisational, long-term cooperative arrangements aimed at achieving a desired future state that is beneficial for all partners involved (Elmuti et al., 2005) and/or encompassing tactical activities for safeguarding gains that have already been realized (Newman & Chaharbaghi, 1996). The topic has, for some time, been widely covered in the strategic management literature, largely in the context of efforts to sustain competitive market advantages (Porter, 1989). SAs provide a multiplicity of benefits to organisations. These include but are not limited to; gaining access to new markets, exchange of knowledge and technologies, sharing the risk of financial investments, pool and combine resources, provide new venues for learning, support institutional legitimacy, and defending the interests of incumbent players (Angwin & Sammut-Bonnici, 2014; Mamédio et al., 2019). Despite these advantages, the literature suggests that SAs are less appealing to organisations possessing proprietary technologies, enjoying strategic cost advantages as well as those with a dominant field position in terms of market share (Angwin & Sammut-Bonnici, 2014). Hence, SAs "can serve as a type of strategic choice or alternative that can enable companies [and other types of organisations] to cope with unstable, global and competitive environments permeated by new threats and opportunities" (Mamédio et al., 2019, p. 83).

This extended editorial first offers a review of the rise of SAs within management and organizational studies, followed by a review of literature of these alliances in the public sector and in higher education (HE). The final part of the paper outlines this special issue in brief by reviewing the contours of each contribution.

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SAs are far from being a novel undertaking, dating back to the 1980s, yet their number has increased exponentially in the last three decades or so across a wide variety of industries or organizational fields (Ferreira et al., 2014). These quantitative developments have been matched by qualitative shifts as well, with organizations embarking on SAs with those in close proximity and/or within their core business (Hagedoon & Schakenraad, 1990, in Keil, 2000). In terms of scope, SAs range from informal 'handshake-style' gentlemen agreements to highly formalized arrangements which may result in structural integration like joint ventures (Elmuti et al., 2005).

Angwin and Sammut-Bonnici (2014) refer to two main types of SAs, either involving competing or non-competing organisations. As regards the former, these can take the shape of: a) pre-competitive or shared-supply alliances, covering a stage in the production process (e.g. design or manufacturing); b) quasi-concentration alliances, covering the entire production process and resulting in a common product; and c) complementary alliances, in those cases when the assets of the partners involved are different in nature. When it comes to non-competing SAs, these may take the shape of: a) international expansion joint ventures, formed by partners from different countries; b) vertical partnerships, amongst partners operating at two successive stages of the production process; and, c) cross-industry agreements, formed by organisations from different fields or sectors with the aim of fostering complementary capabilities.

> "Organizations often decide to partner not because they have the same needs, but because they have *complementary needs and assets*. Strategic alliances are often characterized by partners bringing their own unique strengths to bear on a problem (Weiss, 1987) […] Additionally, organizations initiate strategic alliances to achieve *compatible goals*—again, not identical, but common or mutually beneficial—that might not be achieved otherwise (Austin, 2000; Das & Teng, 1998; Kanter, 1994; Oliver, 1990; Robertson, 1998; Spillett, 1999)." (Wohlstetter et al., 2005, p. 421; emphasis added).

Management scholars have suggested the term *coopetition* to characterize the complex and dynamic nature of collaborative arrangements involving competing firms (Bouncken et al., 2015). The higher the competitive overlap amongst partners the less incentives there are to share knowledge as this may endanger their competitive advantages (Meier, 2011, p.12). *Trust* is seen as a key mechanism to mediate inherent tensions, and potentially negative consequences, associated with SAs involving direct competitors (ibid.). Open communications, shared values and mutual respect are thought to leverage interorganizational trust (Robertson, 1998).

Studies reveal that partner commitment to an alliance is stronger under market conditions characterized as highly uncertain (Wu & Cavusgil, 2006). Some scholars go one step further while contending that:

> "[…] *learning* is the main objective; *trust* is the factor determining success or failure; *technology* is the aggregating tool; *culture* affects the relation; and *communication* is not an end but a means to construct consolidated, long lasting and high-performing strategic alliances." (Jatobá et al., 2023, p. 1523; emphasis added)

In their highly cited and influent paper titled '*Alliance advantage: The Art of creating value through partnering*', Doz and Hamel (1998, p.29) contend that grasping the strategic linkages between partner organizations requires considering their other alliances and their interrelationships. For Keil (2000), alliance capabilities are critical for

organizations that are involved with multiple collaborations as these "are increasingly forced to institutionalize alliance management practices" (p. 33).

Reviews of the extant literature on SAs, both across the corporate or for profit- and the public- sectors alike, reveal a set of important features, namely:

- SAs move through *several phases* as they develop and evolve;
- They are initiated to meet a *variety of needs*;
- Their operation requires certain *organizational structures and processes*; and
- A variety of factors influence their *progress* over time (Wohlstetter et al., 2005, p. 420)

Similarly, a comprehensive literature review of papers in (31) top-ranked management journals, for the period 1993–2012, shows that SAs research resorted to three main theoretical traditions; transaction costs, knowledge and learning perspectives, and social networks (Ferreira et al., 2014, p.125). The study shows a gradual but steady move from classic neo-economic conceptions of costs and benefits towards resource-based view arguments (as sources of competitive advantage) centered on the importance attributed to partner capabilities and knowledge-based explanations (as shown in Table 1).

Finally, leaders have been found to play critical roles in alliance formation and development. Building on the seminal work by Snow et al. (1993), on network organizations, Smith and Wohlstetter (2001, pp. 509–510) shed light on three, key leadership roles in the context of SAs:

- *Architects* are responsible for designing structures that facilitate employee participation in the alliance and its daily management.
- *Information brokers* distribute information throughout the alliance, ensuring that stakeholders receive the required information while avoiding information 'dumps' that burden them with the need to sift through information irrelevant to their jobs and responsibilities.
- *Boundary spanners* serve as liaisons with the external environment, providing the media and other constituents with information about the alliance, as well as 'buffering' the alliance from external 'noise.'

We first take a cursory review of SAs in the field of public sector, before moving on to strategic alliances in HE.

Strategic alliances and the public sector

Sectoral networks, inter-organizational networks and alliances have, in the last two decades or so, become prominent strategic features across a wide range of the public sector, too. This includes varied policy fields such as education, welfare reform, public health, transportation, as well as water- and prison- management (Wohlstetter et al., 2005). Alliances take a variety of network-related forms, most notably along the lines of public private partnerships (PPPs) aimed at sharing financial risks and the transfer of skills and knowledge and other key competencies (Hodge & Greve, 2007). A major global review of the topic (over 1,400 scientific papers over 20 years) underscored, amongst other aspects, stakeholder alignment, inter-organizational governance mechanisms, incentives alongside

Table 1 Evolution of SAs themes in the strategic management literature (1993–2012)

1993–1997	1998–2002	2003–2007	2008–2012
1. Performance & competitive strategy	1. Transaction costs	1. Learning & collaboration	1. Knowledge transfer & learning
2. International Joint Ventures (JVs)	2. Learning, networks & access resources	2. Governance & Transaction costs	2. Governance & Transaction costs
3. Governance & Transaction costs	3. JVs: Structure & reciprocity	3. Alliance formation & coordination	3. Social networks
	4. Interfirm coordination	4. Social networks	4. Alliance formation & coordination

Source: Ferreira et al. (2014, p. 122)

learning and knowledge management as key success features (Roehrich et al., 2014). To illustrate the challenges involved, consider one such venture centered on the development of a major teaching hospital in West London. The project collapsed as a result of high operational costs and difficulties in reaching agreement amongst the stakeholders involved—universities, research funders, hospitals, etc. (McKee et al., 2006).

In her comprehensive study of regional councils in Norway, Zyzak discloses five key mechanisms underpinning the development and ultimate success (or failure) of inter-organizational collaborations as secondary structures, namely: (i) inter-organizational structure; (ii) the management of trust; (iii) the role of network managers, in broking and managing network connections; (iv) the ability to leverage multidimensional networking, combining different network/innovation types; and (v) the importance of geography/physical proximity in managing relationships (Zyzak, 2017; Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2020).

Finally, a study on the formation and evolution of SAs involving U.S. charter schools, points to the importance of environmental or external factors.

> "During the *initiation phase*, catalysts in the external environment tended to motivate leaders to seek alliances to meet financial or political needs. In *subsequent phases*, agents in the external environment—funders, constituents, authorizers— often encouraged the development of accountability mechanisms and evaluation plans by holding alliances accountable for meeting certain goals. Additionally, *turbulence* in the external environment sometimes forced alliances to return to previous stages to solve new problems or change directions." (Wohlstetter et al. (2005, p. 437; emphasis added)

We now turn to understanding SAs as they manifest themselves in the HE field.

Institutional alliances in higher education

SAs are not a new feature in the global HE field, but their saliency has increased in the last two decades or so, in the light of changing market dynamics, like demographic shifts, competition and changes in regulative regimes (Callender et al., 2020). Fiercer competition – for funding, talented students and staff and prestige more broadly – has resulted in qualitative shifts in the national and global HE landscapes manifested, *inter alia*, in the form of vertical stratification or differentiation (Cantwell & Marginson, 2018). The latter is, according to classic economic arguments, a distinct feature of a competitive market landscape (*cf*. Becker, 2017). It should be noted that, in the majority of HE systems across the world, with the exception of those few ones with a rather prominent private, for-profit sector (e.g., Brazil, India, Australia and Japan) dynamics are best characterized as pertaining to 'regulated quasi-markets' (Marginson, 2013).

As a mechanism of strategic response to fast changing technical and institutional environments, universities, and other types of HE institutions have engaged in different types of collaborative arrangements, some of which were initiated voluntarily whilst others were mandated top-down by governments. This is the case of mergers involving different types of HE institutions. While motives for mergers are similar to those driving the formation of SAs – which aim at strengthening and sustaining the national and global competitive position of the institutions involved, mergers differ from SAs with respect to the degree of structural amalgamation (Elmuti et al., 2005). Economies of scale and the need for further rationalization – resulting from fragmentation and financial stringencies—have been found

to be primary merger drivers (Harman & Harman, 2003; Pinheiro et al., 2016). As is the case of mergers involving private sector organizations, HE mergers are shaped by external imperatives, such as stakeholders' support (Stensaker et al., 2016), and often result in unanticipated consequences, "some of which are strategically significant" (Rowley, 1997, p. 12).

Studies from the Nordics reveal that geographic distance, the number of partners involved, size, institutional profiles, communication, and leadership act as critical merger factors (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013; Mathisen & Pinheiro, 2016). Moreover, HE mergers challenge institutionalized work practices, traditions and local identities and are laden with conflicts and contradictions (Geschwind et al., 2016). Beyond the Nordics, studies have found that the merger type (either voluntary or forced) does not seem to have a significant effect on academic staff integration (Cai, 2007). A conceptual exercise by Cai et al. (2016) points to four important, exogenous and endogenous, factors affecting the successful institutionalization of HE mergers, namely: (i) the external institutional environment; (ii) organizational culture, largely understood as relating to the internal institutional environment; (iii) organizational profitability; and, (iv) self-interest profitability.

> "The more the post-merger organizations conform to or are compatible with *legitimated values* in the [HE] field and the more compatibility there is between the cultures of premerger groups, the higher the likelihood that the merger will be institutionalized. Meanwhile, the greater the potential *profitability* (either general or individual) that is seen or perceived, the more likely it is that the merger will be adopted by the merged organization and its members." (Cai et al., 2016, p. 18; emphasis added)

Strategic alliance arrangements in HE differ from mergers because they are built on stand-alone HE institutions, e.g. in the form of regional, national and/or international consortia or partnerships. However, they show similarities when it comes to the exogenous and endogenous factors affecting the successful institutionalization of this type of long-term collaboration. A 2016 European Commission review of European HE systems refers to four types of policy instruments governments can use to either set framework conditions or implement targeted measures for stimulating collaborations amongst HEIs; regulation (e.g. around quality assurance), funding (incentives), information (use of ICT), and organization (experts, networks, agencies, etc.) (OECD, 2017, p. 37). Following on this assessment, a subsequent review by the OECD claims that, for governments to be effective in devising framework conditions (institutional environment) for promoting and supporting SAs in HE, there is a need to "achieve policy alignment, stimulate institutional initiative, secure stakeholder buy-in, support planning and implementation, and concentrate resources." (OECD, 2017, p. 70).

As alluded to earlier, SAs involving HE institutions are not a novel pursuit per se, but they have intensified in both scale and scope since the early 2000s, and are "fast becoming a global phenomenon" (Stensaker, 2018, p. 134). At the national level, these include the *Russel Group, GuildHE* and transregional university alliances in the UK, Australia's *Group of Eight*, Canada's *U15* and *SKY* in South Korea (Stensaker, 2008; Harrison et al., 2016). As for network arrangements crossing national boundaries, prominent initiatives encompass *LERU* (League of European Research Universities), the *Guild of Europe*, *ARUA* (African Research University Alliance), *IARU* (International Alliance of Research Universities) (Stensaker, 2008); in addition to AEUA (Alliance for Entrepreneurial Universities in Africa) and the US's University Innovation Alliance (UIA) and American Association of

Table 2 Major European university alliances

University alliance	Founded	Members	Membership type	Geographical focus
European (EU) University Association (EUA)	2001	850	Comprehensive, mixed	European
Compostela Group	1993	69	Narrow	Global
EU Association of Institutions in HE (EURASHE)	1990	61	Comprehensive, mixed	European
Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA)	1999	46	Narrow	European
Coimbra group	1985	38	Narrow	European
Santander group	1988	32	Narrow	European
The Utrecht Network	1987	32	Narrow	European
League of European Research Universities (LERU)	2002	23	Narrow	European
The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities	2016	18	Narrow	European

Source: Vukasovic and Stensaker (2018, p. 354)

Universities (AAU). Table 2 provides an overview of the major university consortia alliances operating in Europe.

As is the case with other network-type arrangements (cf. Powell et al., 1996), SAs involving HE institutions have been found to shift both *purpose* and *roles* over time, hence, denoting characteristics of dynamic entities (Stensaker, 2018). Moreover, as far as outcomes are concerned, the same study points to evidence of bilateral relationships, with SAs both shaping the domestic environments or fields in which they operate in, as well as their respective member or partner universities, e.g., by enforcing compliance to joint academic standards (ibid.).

Research from the UK, on transregional alliances, advances five key collaborative considerations: (i) *prestige*, with research-intensive, elite universities dominating research consortia; (ii) *geography and spatial proximity*, thought to be vital insofar equipment sharing (e.g., labs) but less so as regards training partnerships; (iii) create a "super strength alliance" aimed at becoming the undisputed *centers of excellence*, nationally with the ability to compete on a global scale; (iv) establish a "strong-across-the-board alliance", composed of partners with *complementary strengths*; (v) and *personal and professional ties*, "critical factors in determining which collaborations are established, maintained and developed, and on what terms" (Harrison et al., 2016, pp. 927–929). Finally, insofar outcomes (meso and macro levels), the above analysis contends that "while high-performing research institutions may compete better by forming consortia, transregional alliances lead to a more unequal and divided university sector." (p. 910).

Transnational strategic alliances in higher education

While on the conceptual level SAs can involve actors from one or multiple regional or national entities, this special issue primarily focuses on transnational strategic alliances, which is what the European University Initiative (EUI) stands for. A recent comprehensive review of the extant literature on transnational SAs in HE (Fehrenbach & Huisman, 2022) highlights the following aspects:

- The earliest contribution from the study sample ($N = 72$) dates back to 1999;
- Most studies are of a descriptive nature, lacking both definitions and theoretical considerations;
- None of the sampled studies adopted a combined or systematic approach by investigating rationales, approaches and benefits;
- A fair number of studies suffers from methodological shortcomings; small scale surveys, lacking discussion of results, little reporting on method choices, absence of longitudinal design choices, etc.;
- Absence of distinction between collaboration as a dimension of internationalization as either a central vs peripheral consideration in matters of strategy;
- None of the studies conceived of transnational SAs as "an integrated organizational-level endeavour, contributing simultaneously and in a variety of (multidisciplinary) areas to the education, research, and the third (social) missions." (p. 8)

Table 3 below shows the key theoretical strands (and respective rationales) underpinning SAs involving HE institutions.

Table 3 Theoretical perspectives and rationales for SAs in HE

| Key theoretical perspective	Rationale for startegic alliances
Resource-based perspective	Achieve the best possible value-creation configuration by combining or leveragibng resources
Knowledge-based view	Pursuit of knowledge as the most strategic resource
Dynamic capabilities perspective	Ability to integrate, build and reconfigure knowledge capabilites and competencies to address unpredictable environments
Transaction cost economics perspective	Minimize production and transaction costs in acquiring resources and assets
Agency theory	Share mutual gains by clarifying ownership, control and incentives (risk management)
Resource dependence	Reduce uncertainty by alliancing for power and control
Social networks	Gain from ties to actors within a network
Stakeholder theory	Tackle uncertainty related to organizational reputation
Neo-Institutional theory	Status and legitimacy

Source: Fehrenbach and Huisman (2022, p. 11)

As alluded to above, the EUI, a program aimed at strengthening strategic and in-depth transnational collaboration through the development of strategic networks involving universities throughout the European Continent, has received considerable attention in the last couple of years (Estermann et al., 2021). Some have described this endeavor as resembling a 'network of networks', overcoming the inherent challenges in attempts to establish a supranational (European) university since the 1950s (Dunn, 2020, p. 26). In a similar vein, the EUI has been characterized as a special kind of inter-organizational arrangement resembling a multidimensional 'meta-organization', whose membership is composed of other organizations rather than individuals as such (Maassen et al., 2023; Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). From a governance perspective, it is argued, the SAs composing the EUI act as "mechanisms linking up macro and micro levels in the European higher education area, representing a particularly interesting form of instrumental agency that can foster transformations in higher education." (Maassen et al., 2023, p. 4).

Recent evidence suggests that the EUI alliances (a total of 91 as of September 2023) largely rely on pre-existing partnerships whilst experimenting with a diversity of institutional forms to achieve the ambitious goals set out by the program (Charret & Chankseliani, 2023). Earlier studies have shown that the partner composition of the first set of (17) alliances, when it comes to their geographic spread, was, to a certain degree, shaped by political considerations with a substantial share of partners based in Western Europe, most notably from the (4) largest EU members states – France, Germany, Italy and Spain (Jungblut et al., 2020, p. 411–12).

In terms of internal dynamics, and as the case with other types of SAs (as alluded to above), EUI alliances and their respective interest organizations have been found to expand their strategic agendas and scope over time (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). Furthermore, conceived as interest group constellations, their internal dynamics aim to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the 'logic of influence', focusing externally on policy-makers as a key audience, and, on the other, the 'logic of membership', centered on the internal needs and preferences of its members (p. 352).

A number of recent studies have looked at the internal governance structures composing the SAs within the EUI. A 2020 survey by the European University Association
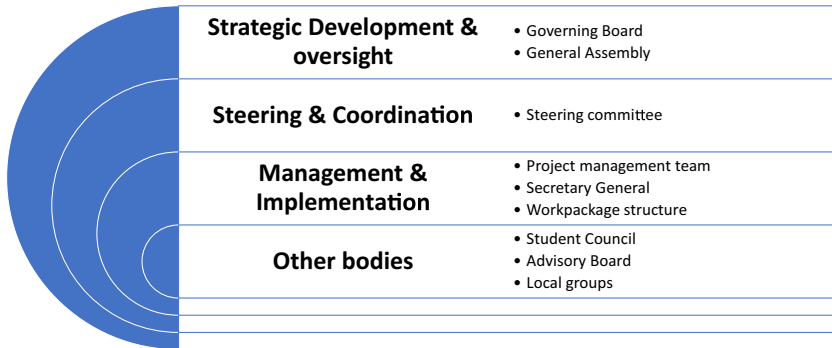
Source: Esterman et al. (2021, p. 9)

Fig. 1 A 'typical' EUI Governance structure. Source: Estermann et al. (2021, p. 9)

(EUA), revealed that most of the 20 alliances under investigation rely on a step-by-step or incremental approach, whilst testing different settings, structures, and operational models (Estermann et al., 2021, p. 9). The apex of the governance structure underpinning the EUI alliances encompasses a high level and long-term development and oversight body (composed of senior representatives from each partner), "responsible for defining the general policy, long-term strategies, and policy priorities" (ibid.). At the operational level, a steering committee responsible for oversight works alongside a project management team responsible for implementation and the management of daily affairs. This arrangement is supported, bottom-up, by a variety of supportive bodies composed of internal and external interest groups; academics, administrators, students, external parties, etc. (as visualized in Fig. 1). It is worth noting that, in some cases, the involvement of students is deeply embedded in the alliances' governance structures, with elected representatives taking part in high level decision making (p. 10).

Another recent study of governance models involving two contrasting EUI alliances - Circle U. and FORTHEM – demonstrates that most consortia decisions pertaining to both strategic and operational matters are made on a consensual basis, with factors such as resource dependencies, soft power, trust, and tensions underpinning internal decision-making processes (Claussen, 2022). Subsequent studies, using the same sample and dataset, characterize such developments as hybrid decision processes, "as much as the alliances themselves function as hybrid meta-organizations linking the local micro-level (partners' tasks and roles) with the macro-level environment construed by European integration in the higher education sector." (Pinheiro et al., forthcoming).

Estermann et al. (2021) comprehensive survey also reveals that EUI alliance objectives are contingent on member composition:

> "As envisaged in each alliance portfolio and mission statement, the combination of institutions is not incidental, but based on the understanding that those institutions share a similar profile or geographical specificities (post-industrial cities; sea and maritime areas, etc.), have common experience and expertise and are committed to a joint vision to address future challenges. (p. 20)"

The above study also outlines some of the key *challenges* facing EUI alliances. These include changes in the leadership composition at the partner universities, striking a balance between institutional transformation and innovation (e.g., insofar governance models) and more pragmatic operational considerations like student and staff mobility and the creation of a European degree, as well as ensuring that all relevant internal and external stakeholders are actively engaged with and supportive of the agreed objectives and ongoing consortia activities (p. 16–20). Pinheiro et al. (forthcoming) contend that, although limited in terms of funding, the EUI alliances are, in principle, conceived as more permanent institutions, hence requiring long-term commitment – people and resources—at all levels to ensure both alliances' future relevance and resilience (Estermann et al., 2021, p. 20, 22).

Pinheiro and Gänzle's (forthcoming) analysis of the EUI offers interesting lessons to students of multi-level governance systems, both as an intermediary between levels as well as a level in their own right.[1] First, from the prism of polycentric governance and the management of complexity (Thiel et al., 2019; Trondal et al., 2022), the EUI, it is argued, underscores the importance of flexible network arrangements substantiated on the combination of top-down (EU) and bottom-up (HEIs) rules and regulations.

> "By allowing considerable degrees of autonomy to HEIs (implementation stage) the EU agencies responsible for steering the EUI mechanism seem to have stricken the right balance between substantive (goals) and procedural (means) autonomy on the one hand, and between accountability and trust on the other." (Pinheiro and Gänzle, forthcoming)

Finally, when it comes to hybrid governance arrangements, Pinheiro and Gänzle (forthcoming) argue that the EUI reiterates the importance associated with flexible institutional frames that enable the mobilization and co-existence of different value creation logics (societal relevance, scientific excellence, European integration, etc.) in the context of a pluralistic institutional environment, as is the case of the emergent European HE space.

The special issue in brief

Bjørn Stensaker, Peter Maassen and Arianna Rosso ("The European University Initiative – Investigating alliance formation and initial profile developments") explore the making and early days of the EUI. The EUI – launched by the European Commission in 2018 and following a proposal made by the then new French President Emanuel Macron – has been received with considerable interest from HEIs in Europe. Eventually, hundreds of institutions started to form alliances, sometimes entirely new ones, sometimes departing from well-established networks. While the EUI in many ways subscribes to the well-trodden path of European HE collaboration across national borders, the initiative also contains several novel elements – in particular with regards to institutional commitment, legalization and long-terms prospects of partnership. Drawing on a series of qualitative interviews with key persons at alliance level, the authors offer new insights into the formation process and profiling of alliances. They find that the alliance formation has been complex due to the simultaneous activation of collective and individual networks of institutions with path-dependency ultimately shaping the membership of the alliances.

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[1] We thank Prof. Jarle Trondal for bringing this critical insight to the authors' attention.

Courtney Hartzell, Jessica Schueller, Flavia Soares Colus and Nathália Cristina do Rosárion ("Stakeholder influence in university alliance identity – an analysis of European Universities Initiative mission statements) analyse how networks of the recently established EUI place themselves discursively vis-à-vis each other as well as the wider community of stakeholders, including the European Commission as well as (sub)national actors. They ask how EUI alliances communicate their identity as well as legitimacy in response to the EU's programmatic initiative. Using insights from organizational and institutional theory, the authors explore a set of publicly available mission statements drawing on instruments of qualitative data analysis. The authors find that EUI alliances anchor their identity within generally accepted areas of value and concern for their stakeholders while at the same time exposing a range of ambitions albeit in varying degrees and with the aim of distinguishing themselves from other initiatives. Thus, the findings suggest that alliances exert bounded agency and the further evolution of these alliances, if prevailing, will show to what extent these patterns will become institutionalized practices.

Lukas Fuchs, Carlos Cuevas-Garcia and Gunter Bombaerts ("The societal role of universities and their alliances: The case of the EuroTeQ Engineering University) examine the inner machine room of a EUI alliance of universities of science and technology. After an analysis of the societal demands advanced by the EUI, the authors seek to unbox learning processes within the network established by EuroTeQ, which contain six universities with a strong focus on furthering training and education in engineering. Conceiving of these alliances as learning networks empowering universities to share knowledge, strategies, and reflections, they explore one particular case, the 'EuroTeQ Collider', a joint educational program, in some depth. It illustrates that unevenly spread knowledge and expertise provides an ideal breeding ground for developing novel educational formats and stakeholder engagement that ultimately create new opportunities for exchange and learning. Even (some) unequal partners may bring systemic advantages to the entire alliance.

Pushpa Asia Neupane ("Advancing Internationalization through an International Network: A Case Study of a European Institution") provides a broader perspective on internationalization in higher education as a sectoral response to globalization trends – including a set of policy recommendations. Drawing on dynamic systems theory, the author explores a case of European HE seeking to implement 'internationalization' through an international network. The author finds the formulation of strategic priorities, network adaptation and partnerships beyond the network as key factors triggering positive impact on successful internationalization. In addition, trust was seen by administrators as an essential element underpinning the strategic conceptions, partner interactions and implementation processes within the network.

Ludovic Highman, Simon Marginson and Vassiliki Papatsiba ("Strategic European partnerships for UK universities post-Brexit: navigating a globally contested field of world-class universities") assess how universities in the United Kingdom (UK) seek to maintain their global position considering the country's withdrawal from the European Union. Applying Bourdieu's theory of "economy of practices" and drawing on numerous semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives from a dozen of UK universities (from England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland), the authors determine which types of universities are most inclined to form comprehensive strategic partnerships with key European institutions as part of their internationalization strategies of the post-Brexit era. The authors show that partnership strategies significantly diverge between teaching- and research-focused universities, with the latter type more likely to instigate international linkages in times of political and economic turmoil. Moreover, it is suggested that strategic partnerships are set to become 'anchor frameworks' for deeper collaboration, with

hegemonic models and practices mirroring the strategic efforts of leading research-intensive universities to both defend and improve their market positions.

Finally, Jari-Pekka Kanniainen and Elias Pekkola ("Scenarios for the European University Initiative between Harmonization and Unification") sketch out future scenarios regarding the integration of European HE in the aftermath of the EUI. The authors aim to understand potential development paths superseding the intergovernmental Bologna Process since 1999. Departing from core assumptions spelt out by proponents of grand European integration theories, e.g., supranationalism and (liberal) intergovernmentalism, integration in HE is briefly reviewed and four scenarios are subsequently discussed. The authors argue that the evolving landscape of strategic alliances in European HE calls for a reconsideration of how collaboration among HEIs is assessed: more context-sensitivity is needed because the recently formed alliances are difficult to grasp within a single conceptual approach. Furthermore, they remind us that assessments of 'success' and evaluation criteria will differ depending on whether the beneficiary is a member state, the EU, or an institution. The authors underscore that, despite deep and strongly cared out path dependencies, the future development of HE as a transnational space of collaboration is far from ascertained. They point to the need for redefining the evaluation framework for international collaboration, alongside a critical assessment of the basic assumptions on the centrality of national benefits and agency in European HE.

The various contributions to this special issue provide fresh evidence for the dynamic and complex of strategic alliances involving HE institutions. In many respects, the new insights confirm earlier findings with respect to the centrality of complementary competencies and resources, alongside the importance attributed to aspects like geographic reach, communications, and trust. Evidence suggests that alliances are indeed becoming more central for HEIs, in strategic terms, i.e., a necessary condition for leveraging and sustaining competitive advantages at the national and international levels. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the prevalence of SAs across the board seems to have made alliances less relevant when seen from a more tactical lens. This could be due to the fact that, as they proliferate across the HE field, alliances have become 'less special'. The turbulent socioeconomic, cultural, and political environments in which HEIs and academic groups operate poses a multiplicity of competing challenges and demands. Arguably, alliances can aid such types of responses, but they also increase transaction- and other coordination- costs, and may require unpopular (and costly) institutional adaptations at the local level. Moreover, evidence suggests that despite the high strategic aspirations set out in supranational initiatives like the EUI, these lofty aims are, to a large extent, not being backed up with the resources required to mobilize academics across the board over a sustained period of time. Finally, the top-down nature of strategic initiatives is largely at odds with the bottom-up daily efforts and activities by members of the academic core, whose professional practices, values, and identities reflect the needs and aspirations of their respective scholarly/practice communities rather than that of management and/or the policy elites that promote such strategic endeavors in the first place.

The case studies composing this special issue also attest to the role played by supranational dimensions underpinning new dynamics of cooperation and integration in the vast field of European HE. Just like the Bologna Process almost one generation ago, the EUI adds yet another feature to the developing HE area in Europe. Although the French President Emanuel Macron might, in 2017, have had other ideas about the small set of 'European Universities' capable of competing with top universities at the global scale, the initiative has morphed within the spade of only five years, into several distinct alliances covering hundreds of European universities across Europe, also including partners from

non-EU countries. Although it is still too early to present a comprehensive evaluation, it is safe to assume that the initiative has pushed the HE actors in the field to rethink their strategic positioning and ambitions with regards to opportunities (and constraints) provided by the EU. The EU Commission has remarkably well understood – as already in the case of Bologna – to place itself as a supranational entrepreneur in a policy area for which it does not have *de jure* competence, at least not in the language of the Treaty. For the first time, in the history of European (transnational) universities associations, the EU Commission has become a direct interlocutor for the university leadership, thus technically bypassing the member state-level. Furthermore, the mechanism of EUI, in contrast to other established ones, strongly supports endeavors to create a collective European HE identity, to make transnational collaboration more sustainable and long-term, and to 'legalize' (e.g., joint programs, etc.) in a hitherto unseen way. This is in sync with similar EU initiatives in other sectors, such as spatial cross-border collaboration, with the creation of instruments such as the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in the first decade of the 2000s. In sum, we see that university cooperation in Europe has entered the phase of SAs formation – yet, it remains still to be seen, to what extent this process will endure once the funding period comes to a close in a few years (if it comes to a close).

Finally, future studies of SAs involving HEIs, both across Europe and beyond, could shed light on process-related dimensions (coordination, trust, goal achievement, etc.) over time, by adopting longitudinal designs, and attempt to unpack the mechanisms that lead to perceived success as well as failure from the perspective of internal and external stakeholders alike. Attention could also be paid to the effects, at multiple levels, accrued to strategic collaborations, including unintended consequences ('the dark side of SAs').

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